

ELECTRONIC BID SETS STREAMLINE ACQUISITION PROCESS

(Vicki Shepherd, Contracting Directorate)

Since the Federal Acquisition Streamlining Act of 1994 was passed into law, the U.S. Army, and subsequently, the Corps of Engineers, has been moving toward implementing a comprehensive electronic commerce (EC) environment. One of the key components of EC is the Electronic Bid Sets program, known as EBS.

EBS is a method of reproduction, which distributes and advertises contract specifications, drawings, and documents to the contractor community in electronic format using compact disk (CD-ROM) technology. It improves and streamlines the procurement process, eliminating unnecessary reproduction and storage of printed media by the government, and allowing significant savings in our resources.

In 1996, the Corps formed an Electronic Bid Set Working Group, which successfully formulated, developed and tested EBS through five pilot projects. The group is now implementing this program throughout the Corps. With EBS, prospective bidders are allowed to view, search, download and request project solicitation documents electronically via the Internet. A CD-ROM contains all solicitation documents. The only requirement is the use of a Windows-based personal computer and an Internet browser.

As we have done for other initiatives, TAC formed a Process Action Team (PAT) to create the EBS policy. I served as chairperson, and members were Capt. Greg McClure, Mary Bailey, Jane Smith, Wanda Allen, and Kathy Perry. Bill Brewer, chief of Contracting Directorate, was champion. As some of the original team members left, others filled in. Active participants included Dick Constantino, Allen Lane, Karen Willis, Amy Newland, Kelly Kremer, Ron Breen, and Bambi Morris. Our draft policy memo should be published shortly. I'm also working on a very in-depth step-by-step SOP for Contracting personnel on how to create EBS solicitations. With EBS, we expect to see major savings in reproduction and shipping costs. In the case of a recent construction EBS solicitation, the costs for EBS reproduction, including all purely EBS functions such as the creation of plan image files and document conversions, were slightly more than one-fourth of the projected cost of reproducing the same solicitation in paper form - \$1,699 as opposed to \$6,582.

Savings in shipping costs were even more dramatic. Including the labor associated with packaging, the EBS solicitation was shipped overnight at \$123.08, while the paper version would have cost \$1,269.54, a savings of more than

90 percent. These figures do not take into account any individuals within TAC who may require a paper copy of the solicitation. The cost of printing the solicitation from CD to an in-house laser printer was estimated at \$86 (plans and specs), not including the individual's labor.

To assist bidders in locating electronic solicitations offered by the Corps of Engineers, Navy and Air Force, the Tri-Services CADD/GIS Technology Center has developed an Internet web site ("TSN," or "Tri-Service Solicitation Network"). The URL is <http://tsn.wes.army.mil/>. It provides contractors a centralized location linking all participating agencies.

We realize that most contractors do not have the in-house plotting capability to print true full- or half-size

drawings (A1 size - 36" x 24", the format of all our projects designed prior to March 1998). In March 1998, TAC made the decision to adopt the D size - 34" x 22" - as our standard.

This format will allow contractors to use a laser printer to print drawings to scale on 17" x 11" paper. Until we begin issuing solicitations using the new drawing size format, we will continue to issue two copies of the CD-ROM to each contractor on the plan holders list. This will enable the contractor to retain a copy for review and use while sending one copy to the printer.

The TSN provides a continuously updated listing on their web site of printing contractors who are familiar with EBS solicitations and how to print them. The contractors are located across the United States and many can be contacted directly by clicking on the hypertext of their e-mail address. The URL for this list is: <http://tsn.wes.army.mil/TSNSolicitationPrinting.asp>. We include the list current at the time on the CD-ROM when we issue EBS solicitations. When we advertise the EBS on the Internet, there will be a link to the TSN list.

From TSN, a contractor can download the Adobe Acrobat and Source View readers. We include these freeware readers on the CD-ROM when we issue EBS solicitations and will have a link to them on our EBS Internet page. HQUSACE plans to install a new server, which will allow contractors to register for the bidders list.

That would allow us (and other Corps agencies) to use the sample web page designed and offered for use by TSN to all participating agencies. Some Corps offices are currently using this standard web page design. USACE has advocated the use of a standardized design to support its "One Door to the Corps" philosophy. If a contractor becomes familiar with one agency's EBS page, he will be more comfortable with another's page if they look and work the same.

Another feature of our EBS solicitations is the linking of the sectional tables of contents to the applicable clauses and provisions. This will enable the contractor viewing the solicitation to click on a clause or provision title in the table of contents and automatically go to that clause or provision. Based on a spot review, other Corps agencies are not incorporating the linking feature, presumably because it must be done manually by the contract specialist and takes at least several hours for an average-sized solicitation.

Because TAC believes the relatively small investment of time and money is more than offset by the value added to the contractor who is trying to learn a new way of doing business, we have made a conscious decision to provide the linking whenever a project's schedule and budget will allow the additional effort.

TAC believes EBS will result in fairly substantial cost savings for our customers. At the same time, we want to

make these solicitations as user-friendly as possible for our contractors. The EBS process is - wisely - moving gradually from infancy to childhood. We remain committed at TAC to making EBS work in a more efficient and pleasant manner.